A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 38

For whatever else she might have been, Esera remained beholden to the natural development of the Human brain and all the flaws that came with it. And although she was a few days short of her eighteenth birthday, she still suffered from the same problem so many other boys and girls her age suffered from: an inability to go to sleep at a decent time, and consequently, an inability to wake up early. This problem was made even worse by the three years of ceaseless fighting she'd been through, which left her with more baggage than she cared to think about. So, as usual, Esera was late to breakfast. Checking in on the bridge made her even more late; the slow journey to Caramm went on. In the mess hall, the food was out, her crew gathered around the table; they'd already started eating without her.

"...it's really incredible what they've done," Zule Xiss was saying. "Jabiim was a poor mining colony where brigands drank in the muck, it had nothing. But they built a great nation from nothing, they built it together. That's a Stratus quote, by the way. So when someone comes to take away what you and your comrades have built with your own sweat and blood, you fight them, with nothing held back. That's why the Republic and the Jedi failed on Jabiim."

"I believe it," Voyan said. "I just wish it counted for more."

"What do you mean?"

"I got transferred to Grievous's flagship right in the middle of his spree through the Core," said Voyan. "No matter how many Republic fleets he destroyed, there was always another in his way. Grievous didn't lose any battles in the Core operation, he stopped because he no longer had the ships or droids to continue. Once the Republic recovered, they pushed us into the Mid Rim, then the Outer Rim. It's simple mathematics. They can replace more than what we can. That's why it looked like they were going to win the war, before Coruscant."

Murshida and Alize drank and ate, respectively, in silence, listening to the conversation of their younger compatriots. Xiss was not buying what Voyan had to say. "No, it's not just numbers," she said. "That's industrial-economic determinism. The will to victory can always overcome mere numbers."

She still sounds something like a Jedi, Esera thought, eating her breakfast as silently as Alize and Murshida.

"I wish it were that easy," said Voyan, with a sigh.

"You think you're doomed?"

"In the long run, probably."

"Then why fight?"

"Because-"

"It's the principle of the matter?" asked Esera. Her engineer gave her a flat stare. *I'm not going to apologize for that,* Esera thought.

"Mind readers..." Voyan grumbled. "But yes, it really is the principle of the matter. I like being alive. I'm not actually suicidal, no matter what you think, Captain. I *don't* have a death wish. But the thought of going back to living on my knees, just like I did back home..." His mouth tightened into a sneer. "I'm never going back to that. I'd rather end my days as a fugitive fighting a one-man war than go back to where I started."

"A lot of the Jabiimis the Republic fought felt the same," said Xiss. "Isn't that right Komara?"

"Yeah," Esera said, her good humor fading away. "Yeah, they did."

"Think about it, Voyan." Xiss crossed her arms and smirked. "You'll realize I'm right."

Smug Zule Xiss was annoying, but it was a hell of a lot better than broody Zule Xiss in Esera's opinion.

While big star destroyers felt the fuel shortages, tiny craft like Obi-wan's Eta-2 *Actis* interceptor and its hyperdrive ring could get anywhere it wanted in good time. Traveling for twelve hours in a cockpit not much bigger than a casket had not been ideal, but for a Jedi, it was far from unbearable. Meditation did not help pass the time, though. The dark side still clouded everything, like a blanket of shadow smothering all his senses. *Or an oil spill,* Obi-wan thought, remembering a science experiment from his youth in the Temple. The dark side floated above everything, like oil on water, distinct and immutable.

His arrival at Agamar began with a routine exchange of security codes. From above, the planet looked perfectly peaceful. But looking closer, Obi-wan could see long splotches of discoloration across the planet's vast, serpentine main continent, and great swathes of land were obscured by a haze too filthy to be clouds of water vapor. Something unpleasant was happening down there, Obi-wan knew that. Agamar was an infamous planet in the Grand Army. Clone troopers all knew that their walkers had failed in the mountains of that world, forcing the UT-AT to be designed, tested, and put into production in a record ninety-two days. Clone troopers also knew that most clones assigned to Agamar never came back. The few that did were haunted men. Media censorship was tight on Agamar, even the Jedi Council kept news of the planet to itself. Obi-wan had spent most of his flight going over reports from both the Jedi generals on the planet as well as the Agricultural Corps workers deployed to the planet.

Every rumor Obi-wan had heard was true, and then some. Weaponized toxic gas was being used on an unprecedented scale there, the Separatists had conscripted the native population by the millions, and the clone legions had taken such casualties that the first non-clone volunteer army divisions had been deployed to the planet alongside them. The droid general Kalani was holed up in the capital city of Calna Muun, where he orchestrated a tenacious defense that had turned what was supposed to be a sideshow on the road to the Ciutric Hegemony into the defining battle of the region. The Hegemony had fallen two months ago, but the Separatist banner still flew above Agamar. Or, roughly, half of it. The Republic had slowly been pushing the Separatists back on all fronts for the past year. But the Separatists didn't part with a single kilometer of ground without inflicting as much damage as they could; thus the presence of the Agricultural Corps here.

The little interceptor dropped out of the sky and into the military base Obi-wan had been directed to. He had to fly through the oily haze, to a darkened land below. The well-lit base was a sprawling complex, but very rudimentary, a handful of duracrete blocks serving as the administrative center and officer's barracks, while less permanent structures had been erected as hangars for ships and vehicles, and barracks for the grunts. Walkers had pounded out roads of compacted dirt that must have been nasty earlier in the year when it was colder and wetter. Obi-wan's interceptor touched down on one such landing pad of compacted dirt, and a service crew immediately rushed out to get it flight-ready again.

What hit him first was the smell. The foul, acrid stench of burning *something* filled his nostrils, and his eyes were stinging within moments. "General," a crewman said, offering Obi-wan a rebreather and goggles.

"Thank you," Obi-wan choked out. He got them on as fast she could.

"It's the smoke, sir," said another man. "The Seppies have been dropping incendiaries on the dead orchards all week."

"I see," said Obi-wan, looking up at the putrid sky. The system's star was just a pale red dot through the yellow-grey murk above, its light barely strong enough to cast fuzzy shadows in the gloom. He made his way to the administrative building, headed for the office of the commanding officer for all Loyalist forces on Agamar, General Hurst Romodi. Romodi was an imposing man, broad-shouldered and balding, and often personally oversaw battles from the front lines. While Obi-wan could respect his courage and the morale boost it gave his troops, Romodi was definitely going to be wounded or even killed by his style of leadership one day. He did not have a Jedi's reflexes or precognition.

"General Kenobi," Romodi said, standing up from his desk, littered with datapads. "Welcome to Agamar, or what's left of it. We could always use another Jedi around here, no matter what the Cademimuese troops think."

"Thank you, General Romodi," Obi-wan said, "but I'm here on internal Jedi business. With one of our Agricultural Corps workers, actually."

"Really?" Romodi raised an eyebrow. "They keep to themselves, I wasn't aware of any trouble. As far as I'm concerned, they're too busy to get into any trouble."

"Well, it's not about her, so much as it's about someone she knew at the Temple. *That* person is in trouble, and this worker might be able to help her, if she helps us," said Obi-wan. "Though I must admit, I wasn't given any information on what our Corps workers are doing besides 'clean-up' efforts, here."

"You've heard about the toxic gas, right?" asked Romodi. Obi-wan nodded. "It's not just one kind. There's the nerve agent, that'll paralyze your entire body and you'll suffocate in open air. But there's a secondary gas they use, too. It poisons the soil, kills anything growing in it, from the tallest tree to the smallest fungus."

"Why would they do that?" asked Obi-wan. "Agamar is an agrarian planet, the soil is their source of life."

"If Kalani can't have it, no one can," said Romodi. "I suggest you suit up out there, General Kenobi, those gas attacks can happen anywhere from the front lines to forty kilometers back."

"Duly noted, General," Kenobi said. He took out a holoprojector, and brought up the image of the young woman he was looking for. "This is who I'm looking for. Her name is Sanya, she's a nineteen year-old Devaronian. Do you have any idea of where she might be?"

Romodi cleared some of the datapads from his desk to get at his computer terminal. "Last Corps report puts her up at the Laudiun orchards. Brutal work. That's all I can tell you."

Obi-wan thanked him for his time, and set off to find transport that'd take him upstream of the local river to Laudiun. Eventually, he hitched a ride in a troop transport, not with clones, but with Loyalist 'auxiliaries,' one of the volunteer army divisions. They were anything but auxiliary. These were battle-hardened soldiers, Obi-wan could tell, both men and women alike. Riding in a transport with Human women who *weren't* Jedi was strange for him.

"You a Jedi?" asked one man.

"I am," said Obi-wan.

"Huh." No other trooper had anything to say. In the Force, Obi-wan felt both awe and suspicion, and resentment. *What a cold welcome,* Obi-wan thought. Usually a Jedi's presence warranted more attention, but if they were going to leave him alone, he was going to keep to himself. The clones liked to call their armor 'buckets' but it was the helmets of these troopers that truly deserved to be called buckets. A rectangular cut-out showed the faces of the soldiers, with attachment points for their breathing masks. Their only other armor was a grey plastisteel cuirass and pauldrons. They bore the mark of the planet Cademimu's government. *Before the war, most of Cademimu's food supply came from Agamar. When Agamar left the Republic, the food shipments stopped... Maybe that's where Romodi found all these willing soldiers.* Obi-wan could believe there were all volunteers. After all, Agamar had condemned the ten billion souls of Cademimu to starve over a tax dispute with Coruscant. These men and women were here to make sure that never happened again.

As the transport went, Obi-wan peered out of a periscope, one of many built into the vehicle so that the soldiers inside could see what was going on around them. The sky turned from yellow to orange, and then to red, and Obi-wan saw field after field of blackened, bare land, the charred husks of trees standing like alien skeletons. Someone had mentioned the Separatists were burning their own poisoned orchards as they retreated. And some of those tree trunks out there were gigantic, far wider than Obi-wan could have gotten his arms around. The Agamarians had destroyed centuries of their ancestor's work rather than let it fall into enemy hands. *Was it spite or patriotism?* Obi-wan wondered.

Laudiun wasn't much of a place anymore. A scorched road sign marked its location, but all Obi-wan saw were foundations and rubble, all burnt to a crisp. There were familiar sights here, though: Agricultural Corps equipment. A shield bubble protected a small encampment, where an air filter was running. Larger machines sat around, their purposes Obi-wan could only guess at. "Hello there," he said to the first worker he saw.

"Hello..?" the worker answered.

"I'm looking for Sanya. Can you tell me where she is?"

"Up the ridge, two kilometers, maybe three," said the worker.

"Wonderful." Obi-wan was glad he'd done all that cardiovascular exercise at the Temple.

The battle at Vinsoth had already begun before Kronaak's flotilla had arrived. The main Confederate fleet under Admiral Tuuk was engaged in a long-range gunnery battle with the Republic's force. To no one's surprise, most of the Republic fleet was *Venator* cruisers and *Acclamator* support ships, but there was a division of five *Praetor* battlecruisers among them, great wedges approaching four kilometers in length, broad and sleek, with minimal superstructure. The battlecruisers were proper battlecruisers, possessing deadly firepower and incredible speed for their size, but their armor was no better than any of the *Venators* they dwarfed. What these ships were doing here was beyond Kronaak. They were far better suited to hitting Confederate supply lines, the way the Confederate Navy was hitting the Republic's. Despite their greater size, Kronaak would wager his battleship coming out on top of a slugging match with a *Praetor* any day.

While the barbaric Chevins on the planet below might have objected to this massive battle creating debris that would pollute their star system, neither side cared what they had to say. This was a fight that did not concern their planet so much as it concerned the hyperlanes running through the system. Vinsoth lay at a junction where hyperlanes leading to Agamar, Ciutric, Axxila, and Botajef all met. This system was key to the offensive to reunite the galactic north's two Confederate pockets.

Kronaak's ship was some ways off from the battle yet, and Tuuk had directed him to stay back. He checked the security feeds on the starboard hangar, where the mysterious weapon was being assembled. Why SPHA-T weapons were being assembled into a rudimentary bundle with a battery and thruster pack attached to it was beyond him. The thing was unshielded, it would never get close to the enemy before being destroyed. *But it is not my place to question,* thought Kronaak. Orders were orders, and since these were orders that were not ethically dubious, he would follow them.

"Ladellian, ten squadrons of bombers have broken off towards your flank," Admiral Mar Tuuk said over comms.

"We see them, Admiral. Vulture droids already launching." Ladellian answered. She was a Human from Emberlene, the prime planet of one of the many little polities Kronaak had never heard of before the war. Most of the fleet's right flank was comprised of Emberlener ships crewed by Emberleners. Some were domestic models, most were the standard mass-produced types used across the Confederacy. Officers of small regional powers like Emberlene composed most of the Confederate military's leadership, corporate hired guns turned patriots like Kronaak or Pors Tonith or Mar Tuuk himself were in the minority.

Back and forth, back and forth, the battle went. So far, as Kronaak had seen, that'd been all the battle was. Bombardments and strike packages, over and over. Neither side had a clear advantage, yet. Now he came to the attention of the Admiral:

"Kronaak, status."

"Everything is on schedule, sir," said Kronaak, looking at the camera feeds from *Aethra*'s port-side main hangar.

"I want you ahead of schedule," Tuuk said. "Grievous has informed me that a dreadnought is on its way."

"A dreadnought, sir?" Kronaak asked. "All the way out here?" Never had the Republic ever deployed one of its few star dreadnoughts so far from the Core.

"*Incomparable* departed the Kuat almost one standard day ago, she could be here at any minute."

Kronaak clicked his claws on his walking stick. *Incomparable* was the newest of her class, which was less than a dozen strong. At least, Kronaak thought *Incomparable* was the newest. It was hard to keep their names straight, when the others had names like *Indomitable, Invincible,* and *Incorrigible.*

"I will make sure the engineers have everything they need, sir," said Kronaak.

"See to it." With that, Tuuk switched his attention back to the battle.

The Republic's disposition had changed in the last few minutes. They'd gone from maintaining a stand-off to full aggression, and they were closing distance.. Kronaak knew exactly what was happening: the Loyalist ships were more durable and did better in close combat, and they were going to exploit it. Predictably, Mar Tuuk had plans of his own, and the Separatist fleet began to back off. But they wouldn't be able to stay away forever without turning around, and that meant their heavy prow-mounted guns would be useless, at least for a time. Those prow guns were the only thing that let the Confederate ships fight back on somewhat even terms. Tuuk would wait to the last possible minute to flip the fleet around and burn hard for breathing room.

Then, something happened. The *Praetor* battlecruiser division broke formation with the rest of their fleet, and blasted off straight for the edge of the Confederate fleet. With a surgeon's precision, they began to obliterate the frigate picket line that defended the cruisers and battleships deeper in the Confederate fleet. The enemy admiral was as cunning as Tuuk, his battlecruisers were opening a hole at a place where the fewest Separatist ships were available to plug it. And through that hole rushed a new wave of fighters and bombers, forcing their foes to redirect their deflector shields from full front to omni-directional. And once those over-strained shields went down, the ship they protected was quick to follow.

Very quickly, the battle above Vinsoth was turning against the Confederacy. *Where is that cyborg?* wondered Kronaak.

Encounter barely limped into the orbit of Caramm V, a usually six hour flight taking nearly two days, at Voyan's insistence to take it easy. Esera stared down at the planet. From orbit, it appeared barren and bleak, a mess of blue sea, grey land, and white clouds. Only a few spots of green dotted the surface, mostly around the equator.

"Not much to look at," said Voyan, leaning over his console for a better view.

"Was it an ice world?" asked Esera, guessing that the green was the start of a terraforming project.

"It used to be a paradise," Zule Xiss said. She leaned against the bulkhead of the bridge, arms crossed, looking down at the planet with a frown. "A paradise for plants and animals. For people... not so much."

"What happened?" Esera asked her.

"Ado Eemon happened. Things got worse for plants and animals, and for people..." The Zeltron girl sighed, and looked to the floor. "They told me it became a paradise for people. But the nerve staple came from this place. The men who taught the Jabiimis how to use it came from this place. And I'm going to tell you now, Komara, that what's down there is *anything* but a paradise."

"Breaking the conditioning already?" Voyan asked her.

"Shut up, Voyan," Xiss said, giving him a light swat on his head. "I've already told you I'm not brainwashed."

"So you say..."

Esera was left wondering just where the two had found the time to become so familiar. *Doesn't this guy hate aliens? Especially Zeltrons?* But the engineer interrupted her thoughts before they got any farther.

"You think they'll invite you to dinner, Captain?" asked Voyan.

"Of course they are," Esera said, putting her hands on her hips. "I've dined with kings and pirates, a dictator won't make a difference."

"Yeah, it shows," the Zeltron said, with a snort.

Esera gave a confused glance at Xiss, but Voyan spoke: "Don't be mean, Xiss. The Captain is from Stalimur. They're generally shorter and wider than most other Humans more recently descended from Coruscant."

"*Shorter and wider*?" repeated Esera, realizing what the Zeltron had been insinuating about her figure. Xiss snickered.

Too late, Voyan realized his mistake, but to his credit, he didn't back down. "Yes, Captain," he said, staring fixedly at his console. "A small surface area to volume ratio is ideal for maintaining internal temperatures, a desirable trait on a world as cold as Stalimur. A thousand generations of genetic near-isolation and a lack of widespread technology has allowed natural selection to take its course on your home planet."

As quickly as her indignation had sparked, curiosity replaced it. The Tionese Humans had long been isolated from the rest of Humanity, Stalimur's population even moreso owing to its irrelevance and remoteness. She was about to prod Voyan to see what else she could get out of him about her genetic heritage when the inevitable contact from the planet came through.

"We're being hailed, Captain," OOM-451 reported. "It's coming from the office of Ado Eemon."

"On screen," sighed Esera.

The bridge viewscreen folded down from the ceiling, and on it appeared the image of a man very much like his son. Ado Eemon's hair had all gone silver, and his skin wasn't as smooth, but he had all of Ricimer's dashing looks. He even had the same immaculately maintained beard and mustache. "Greetings, Captain Komara," said Ado Eemon. "What brings you to my humble planet?"

"Uh, hello," said Esera, unaccustomed to someone knowing who she was. "My ship received heavy damage in battle with the Republic over Zeltros. I've come seeking a spacedock that can patch us up enough to reach Minntooine."

"We just so happen to have a dock open," Eemon said. He smiled, with enough warmth for Esera to believe it was genuine, even after what she'd heard about this man. "Our resources are at your disposal, Captain."

"Thank you very much," said Esera. *Here it comes,* she thought.

"I must admit, I am curious about your adventures that I've heard so much about. You overthrew the King of Zygerria, you flew within kilometers of a singularity, and, I've been told, were the key figure in aiding Grievous against the attempted coup!" Esera blanched. *How does he know about that!?* Voyan and Xiss certainly didn't, she could feel their attention fixed solely on her now. After knocking her off-balance, Eemon delivered the dreaded invitation: "Permit me an indulgence, if you would, Captain, but I would love to hear about it from you personally. Would you and your crew enjoy our hospitality for a day?"

"Yes, we've love to," Esera said, trying not to slump down in the captain's chair.

"Oh, excellent," said Eemon. "I'll beam landing permissions to your ship. How does seventeen-hundred hours sound to you? Raxus time, of course."

"That's fine."

"We'll see you in a few hours, then." Eemon smiled again, and the feed cut out, showing only the yellow triple spiral emblem of Caramm V.

"Told you we'd get a dinner invitation," Voyan said quietly to Xiss. "By the way, the Captain never mentioned anything about helping Grievous in the coup."

The Zeltron was just as shocked. "Yeah, I can't wait to hear little Komara explain *this.*"

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"Sir, the Loyalists are breaking formation," Captain Dofine said.

Grievous didn't bother replying immediately. He tilted his head as the star destroyers turned as one, bolting off into hyperspace. Of course, Grievous couldn't see that happening with his own eyes, his link to the droid network played a telescopic camera's feed on his heads-up display. "They've held us here in a stalemate for a day," he said. "Why leave now..?"

That dreadnought must not be far from Vinsoth. He checked the droid network, to see what the situation was. Despite Tuuk's significant numerical superiority, a Republic battlecruiser division had decimated the Confederate pickets and Republic attack craft were ravaging the inner formations of the fleet. Grievous resisted every urge in his mind to take command of the fleet at Vinsoth. He was watching the entire battle unfold in real-time, a flood of reports flashing across his implanted heads-up display. But he had to finish business at Ciutric first.

"We are down twenty-two percent of the ships we left with, sir," Dofine said.

"I am aware," Grievous told him. "Dofine, inform the battleship captains they are to stay in orbit and land their troops on Ciutric. Smash the Loyalist garrison, support our allies on the surface."

"Yes, sir," said Dofine, nodding. "We're going to be losing most of our fighter capacity, though."

"I know, Captain. Set course for Vinsoth."

Invisible Hand and the rest of the fleet, minus the battleships, shot into hyperspace, hot on the tails of the fleeing Loyalists.

"It won't be long before we have them on the run, my lord," Moff Wessex's hologram reported. Tarkin raised an eyebrow, and the other admirals in the war room watching the battle unfold stayed silent.

"You've given up holding Grievous at Ciutric, I see," said Tarkin. "Do I need to remind you; that planet was the main objective of your operation?

"The engagement at Ciutric cost Grievous time he could not afford to lose, it let me get the rest of my forces into position. I wasn't confident of my fleet's ability to best the rebel armada, but besting them we are. Admiral Tuuk was no Grievous, that's for sure, and it doesn't matter that Grievous has taken command. When *Incomparable* arrives, it'll be over. And then we'll destroy the rebels on Ciutric once and for all." Wessex said. There were only minutes now, before the dreadnought entered the system.

"So you say, Governor. Can anyone tell me the whereabouts of *Cataclysm?*" Tarkin asked the war room.

"No, my lord," Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence said. Director-General Isard of the Senate Bureau of Intelligence shook his head.

"Then we can be certain *Cataclysm* is on its way to Vinsoth as well," said Tarkin. "That is the only reason they'd pull their prime raider away from its duty and into a pitched battle. They must have detected *Incomparable*'s departure."

"If we have spy drones in every major Separatist system, we can only assume they have them in ours," Isard said.

"Even if *Cataclysm* appears here," Wessex said, looking smug, "we will blast her to pieces. Not even that ship can withstand *Incomparable*'s firepower."

"And the ion weapon?" asked Tarkin.

"It can only fire in one direction, my lord, and it loses power with range," answered Wessex.

"Dramatically so, my lord," said Isard. "Based on the combat data we've gleaned, the ion weapon's power falls off logarithmically after a few thousand kilometers. It's a close-range weapon."

"That being said, be cautious, Governor Wessex," Orlok told him. "Grievous may be a madman, but he's not stupid."

"Duly noted, Director."

Tarkin frowned. He had the feeling Wessex was not inclined to caution. Not with a service record like his, at least. This was a man of bold action and decisive leadership. He cleared his throat. "Governor, you have the only fully mobile fleet in the Republic right now. It would be better to lose this battle in order to win the war, if it means preserving your fleet's operational mobility."

Wessex understood. His shoulders slumped a little, and the energy in his eyes faded. "Yes, my lord. I will not hesitate to retreat if this turns out to be one of Grievous's tricks."

Incomparable arrived, rocketing in out of hyperspace, a leviathan arrowhead eight kilometers long. Grievous had never seen a star dreadnought in person before. Even without camera aid, he saw a tiny sliver far out among the stars, where the other Republic ships were mere specks.

"That is one big ship," a Nemoidian helmsman muttered, when Dofine brought it up on the viewscreens.

"It is only a larger target," said Grievous, for his crew's morale, though he knew full well what they were up against. That behemoth had more firepower than all the Separatist fleet's escorts combined. And Grievous had left his battleships at Ciutric, the one element of his force that could hold up to a star dreadnought. He immediately got Admiral Tuuk on the line. "Tuuk, status report."

"Our formation has been compromised, General," Tuuk answered via hologram. "Their battlecruiser division can fly circles around our heavier ships and are picking off the pickets with impunity. And now *that* thing is here."

"We are not finished yet," Grievous said, clasping his hands. "Is my weapon ready?"

Tuuk glanced away for a moment, and the hologram of Rear Admiral Kronaak joined them. "The weapon is finished, but by my calculations it'll be useless beyond point blank range against an unshielded target," said Kronaak.

"Perfect," said Grievous. "Now we only need to survive until Hatha gets here."

"Where is that ruffian, sir?" asked Tuuk. "I won't be surprised if he's gone pirate."

"Hatha will be here," Grievous told them. If he'd learnt anything about Nemoidians, it was that the lower in social status a Nemoidian was, the more honorable they tended to be. Men like Hatha and the warriors aboard *Invisible Hand* were all the evidence Grievous needed for that idea.

For the next half hour, Grievous rallied the battered Confederate fleet. Tuuk had done as well as he could, but Grievous had not made him second-in-command of the Navy for his combat skills. He was a soldier of logistics first and foremost. That he'd managed to get the fleet to Vinsoth with so little warning was a testament to that ability, though Grievous would keep that to himself for now. *Incomparable* was truly incomparable as a gunnery platform: she sat far back from the Confederate fleet, and blasted away at their shields with impunity. She could burn down entire divisions by herself before they even got into effective turbolaser range. Grievous could only stomp about in frustration, and wish he had an armada of his unbuilt *Oceana*s on hand to answer the Loyalist dreadnought.

In the midst of another attack run from the battlecruiser division and the swarms of fighters and bombers following them, *Cataclysm* appeared unceremoniously sixty degrees above the plane of the star system, high over the battle lines, from Grievous's perspective. Hatha wasted no time in announcing himself.

"General!" the portly Nemoidian cyborg boomed via hologram. "I see I made it after all! We ran into a bit of trouble-"

"We are not here for small talk, Hatha," Grievous said. "Rendezvous with Rear Admiral Kronaak's *Aethra* and prepare to receive my shuttle. I am transferring my flag to your ship."

Hatha stood still, mouth agape for a moment, before he shook himself. "Yes, sir, right away, sir." The hologram cut out.

"Sir?" asked Dofine, giving him an almost betrayed look.

"I need to oversee this myself, Captain," Grievous said. "Your ship does not have the shields or armor to withstand what I'm about to do. I'll be back."

Minutes later, Grievous was aboard *Cataclysm* for the first time since her departure from Minntooine. The silver battleship was a familiar and foreboding sight. Grievous could remember every moment of his failure with *Malevolence*. *Those worthless battle-droids,* he thought, clenching a fist. *How could they have failed to notice the navicomputer was sabotaged? Idiots!* This time, there was no Anakin Skywalker here to ruin everything. Grievous could have smiled, as he remembered that wretched boy's body floating out the airlock.

Gone were the red displays on *Cataclysm*'s bridge. The Nemoidians had turned them blue, a color soothing to the eyes of their species. Grievous preferred electric greens and pinks, but he would let them have their blue.

"General!" Hatha snapped to attention when Grievous emerged from the lift. His crew stayed at their posts, managing the transfer of the weapon from Kronaak's battleship.

"Captain," Grievous said.

"What's the plan, sir?"

"We need to bait the dreadnought out," Grievous said. "But first, send those battlecruisers running."

"Will do, General!" Hatha saluted, and pointed his mechanical arm at the battlecruiser division eating away at the Separatist pickets. "Flanking speed, gentlemen! Deploy squadrons one and two, I want the others ready to launch at a moment's notice. Begin charging the plasma rotors."

Grievous stood on the raised dais above the bridge, watching the Nemoidians work like a well-oiled machine. *Cataclysm*'s acceleration was astounding, even to a veteran of the class like Grievous. She barreled forward like a wild animal bolting from a cage, her deck panels thrummed with energy from the massive reactors well over a kilometer and a half away. Fuel economy had not been in anyone's mind when this ship was built, and it wasn't now. *Cataclysm* was built for speed above all else.

The first ion wave attack caught a battlecruiser square on, the ship's engines and shields winked out, leaving her soaring towards the Confederate fleet helplessly, where she soon melted under the heavy guns, her cruiser's armor no match for the massed turbolasers pointed her way. The others broke off their attack, and fled for the safety of the Loyalist battle line. A cheer went up on *Cataclysm*'s bridge, and no doubt many other bridges in the fleet. The second ion wave attack had a much greater range to cover, and the circle of energy had expanded to such a size and such low concentration that it only tickled the fleeing battlecruisers, causing a few hiccups in their engines.

"Our greatest weakness," Hatha said, nodding to the fading circle. "The ion weapon is many things, but it isn't a standoff weapon."

"No, it's not," agreed Grievous. In the flight to Vinsoth, he'd studied Wessex's record. He was an ambitious man, looking to make a name for himself. His actions were sometimes reckless, but so far he'd always won big when risking big. He reminded Grievous too much of himself. And Grievous knew exactly how to exploit that. "Take us to the front of our line. We're challenging Wessex."

Hatha gulped, but he gave the order. They sat before thousands of turbolasers, alone and exposed. And the Republic came to meet them. Not just *Incomparable,* but the entire fleet with her.

"Is that supposed to happen, sir?" asked Hatha.

Grievous narrowed his eyes. "Not exactly." *Did I underestimate his ego?* Grievous wondered. *Is Wessex even leading this fleet? No, it has to be him in command, his attacks have been perfect, including this one.* An idea came to mind. It was not a bright idea, but it was better than sitting out in the open. He opened up a line to his commanders. "Ladellian, retreat immediately. Your wing of the fleet has been devastated by the battlecruisers. You've lost your nerves. Tuuk, follow her. Kronaak, hold fast."

"What!?" exclaimed Rear Admiral Ladellian. The aged woman looked incensed, she had Emberline's reputation to uphold. "You insult my honor-"

"Shut up," Grievous said, giving her a glare. "Your honor compels you to follow my orders. Break formation and make to escape the planet's gravity well. Prepare a jump to hyperspace." Now Grievous turned to Tuuk. "Tuuk, you will see Ladellian's wing of the battle line falling back. You will be encircled and destroyed if you do not flee."

Admiral Tuuk was quicker on the uptake, and nodded. "I am a Nemoidian, after all."

"Kronaak, you are stubborn and your hatred for the Republic has overwhelmed your common sense. You will hold position, doomed as you are," Grievous said.

"Of course, General," said Rear Admiral Kronaak.

"General, the most dangerous phase of battle is a retreat, feigned or otherwise," said Tuuk. "This could very easily turn into a very real rout."

"We have no choice," Grievous told them. "Carry out your instructions and await for further orders."

The holograms winked out. "What about us, sir?" asked Hatha.

"We will follow Tuuk." said Grievous.

"Is that in your character, sir?"

Grievous eyed the Nemoidian cyborg. "Have I ever fought to the death before?" he asked.

"Well, no, sir, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"They think I'm insane, not stupid," said Grievous. "We retreat with the others when it is clear the battle is lost."

"But it's not lost, you're tricking them," Hatha said.

Grievous growled, but he knew what Hatha was doing, it was what he'd done earlier himself. For the crew's benefit, Grievous gave the obvious answer: "The battle is not lost, Captain. This is how we win it."

The rebel formation's collapse began with one ship turning tail. As brave as *Cataclysm*'s attempted stand had been, the Separatists did not rally to it. On the right flank, a single cruiser flipped around and broke for high orbit. In half a minute, the rest of the fleet was doing the same. Wessex's hologram clapped his hands, and grinned.

"All ships, flanking speed!" he ordered. "We've got them now!"

Tarkin brought his hand to his chin. *Do we have them now?* he wondered.

"There's so many of them, and yet, they flee. I don't like this," Admiral Salima of the Home Fleet said. Normally, she was a fiery and aggressive woman, but something was going against her intuition here. Tarkin was inclined to agree.

"What will you do now, Grievous?" he wondered.

"The Jedi say Grievous is a coward," Director Orlok said. "If he starts running too, this may be real."

In short time, the center of the fleet began to break too. The Separatists turned and bolted, *Invisible Hand* and *Cataclysm* alike. A man more pleased with himself than Denn Wessex was hard to imagine in that moment.

"Like I said, Chancellor, it was over the moment our dreadnought joined the fight. They knew they can't stand against it."

"If this is a trap, it's the riskiest trap I've ever seen," said Tarkin.

"Do you think we're being baited, my lord?" asked Salima.

"I think we are," Tarkin said.

Wessex's moment of triumph cracked. "Shall I halt the pursuit?" he asked. "Their left flank is holding, they haven't totally lost cohesion..."

"I'm no combat admiral," said Tarkin. "My expertise is in strategy and policy, not tactics. This is your call."

"If this is bait, I say we take the bait," Salima said, her usual vigor returning to her. "If you push hard enough, Wessex, you can break them. Assuming they haven't actually broken already."

"I agree. We'll chase them down and destroy them!" Wessex put his fist in his hand.

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Aethra shook and trembled under the tremendous bombardment she was taking, but her shields held. For now. Kronaak checked the tactical display again. His wing of the fleet was all that remained between the Republic and the 'fleeing' Separatist armada. Up ahead was *Incomparable,* a dreadnought nearly thrice *Aethra*'s length. The vast frontal profile of that behemoth looked like a giant dagger, pointed straight at him.

"We can't take this for long," OOM-27 said. The command droid glanced at damage reports coming in from all over their part of the fleet. "Our escorts are being destroyed by the second, sir."

A lot of people were dying out there. *But they're not dying in vain,* thought Kronaak. "Our orders were to engage the Loyalists, and engage them we shall. We fight until our last battery is silenced!"

Come on, Grievous, he thought, *don't let us down!*

"We've got them now!" Grievous announced to *Cataclysm'*s bridge. The Loyalist fleet had charged in, many shooting straight past Kronaak's beleaguered left flank of the former fleet. Every second that passed, the more cruisers flew out of the vicinity of *Incomparable.* Of course, each of those seconds was taking *Cataclsym* further from *Incomparable* as well. But this battleship was the fastest in the Galaxy, all they had to do was cross the threshold where *Cataclsym* could reach *Incomparable* before the majority of the Loyalist cruisers could reach her.

The losses they were taking, though, were severe. Every ship the Separatists lost was one less ship for a future campaign. One less ship that could not be replaced as fast as the Republic could replace its own losses, in the long run. Wessex was chasing hard, biting at the heels of the two retreating fleets. He wanted to panic them. Already, Grievous could see it setting in, in both parts of the battle. The ships of Kronaak's fleet were drawing closer together, seeking refuge in numbers, using each other as cover. The ships of Tuuk's and Ladellian's fleets were becoming more strung out, as the faster ships left the slower ones in eagerness to escape the incoming fire.

This is minutes away from being a real disaster, thought Grievous. It was still too soon for him, but he was out of time. "Captain Hatha, turn us around. I want us right on top of that dreadnought!"

"Yes, sir," Hatha answered, visibly gulping. The helmsmen flipped the battleship about, and threw the levers that put the engines at maximum power. The entire vessel rumbled with power.

Grievous opened a channel to the entire fleet. "All ships, reverse course!" he ordered. "Hit them with everything you've got!" The critical moment had arrived. Would they do as told, or would they continue their flight to safety?

The Emberleners flipped about immediately, opening up on the incoming Republic ships with a vicious volley of heavy turbolaser fire. Tuuk's fleet was slower in responding, the frigates and destroyers not as eager to stop until the cruisers and battleships had. Grievous was not surprised; Emberlene had an ancient military tradition. Tuuk's fleet was mainly Trade Federation and other corporate naval assets cobbled together with former pirates and freebooters.

Cataclysm was soon in the thick of it, barreling through formations of star destroyers. "Prepare the ion weapon," Grievous said.

"Charging plasma rotors, sir," a gunnery officer answered.

"Helm, prepare to adjust our angle relative to the dreadnought by eighty-two degrees. We will be perpendicular to their dorsal surface when we pass by."

"Yes, sir!"

Incomparable appeared to be hurtling towards them, but they were hurtling towards her. As they neared, every Loyalist ship took a shot at them, but they were flying at such a speed that the star destroyers' turrets could not track them at such short range. However, *Incomparable*'s turrets had no such issues. The star dreadnought dumped her entire forward firepower into *Cataclsym*'s shields, which glowed bright blue with absorbed energy.

"Ready the package," Grievous said, to the crew in one of *Cataclysm*'s hangars. "Launch on my mark."

"We're ready, General," came the answer.

"Captain, port forward shields are down!" a crewman announced.

"I want all power on those shields-" Hatha started to say, but he was cut off.

"The capacitors blew, sir, we can't get shields back up in that sector!"

"Then we'll have to trust that Eemon put this ship together well," said Hatha. *Cataclsym*'s port bow was soon melting under the onslaught of turbolasers coming at it. To Eemon's credit, the ship did not fly to pieces.

"Starboard forward shields down, sir!"

"We're wide open, General!" said Hatha, as the ship shook harder and harder. "It's now or never!"

Grievous heard, but did not answer. His heads-up display showed the two countdowns Grievous needed to keep track of. One after another, they hit zero. "Fire ion weapon! Launch the package!"

"Firing ion weapon!" the gunner officer announced. Kilometers out from the dreadnought, the Nemoidian hit the button, and the ring of energy shot out. Within a moment, the dreadnought's and *Cataclysm*'s combined velocities brought the ring dead on-target: the internal engine complex of *Incomparable*'s starboard side.

By itself, the ion weapon would have been a mere nuisance. At such short range and concentration, local shields would have been fried beyond repair, but other generators could have their outputs redirected. The engines, hidden behind thick armor plating, would be offline, but up and running again in minutes. *Cataclysm*'s point-blank range attack would be brave, but useless. Her shields had already failed and the hull itself was under withering turbolaser fire; even her great bulk could not protect her for long.

But Grievous had a trick they'd never see coming up his proverbial sleeve. Even as the ion weapon fired, the crew in the hangar launched the special package. Its rocket thrusters blasted it out on a straight trajectory, bringing a bundle of thirty-eight SPHA beam turbolasers from the battleship to the dreadnought before the point defense grid even knew what had happened. The fusion reactors strapped to the guns would provide just enough energy for one firing of each weapon. Crude magnetic docking clamps fixed the package to the dreadnought, like a virus attaching itself to a cell a million times larger.

Grievous flipped the switch himself. The SPHA-T beams, all thirty-eight of them, lanced through the meters of armor plating, and deep into the dreadnought's interior. *Cataclysm*'s cameras caught the results as the battleship raced away from the scene of the crime. At first, the dreadnought's starboard engine cluster simply went dark, and then the explosions began, bubbles appearing in the armor for only a split-second, before bursting in gushes of fire and debris.

"What the hell was that!?" Captain Hatha exclaimed, watching the burning *Incomparable* enter a flat spin.

"An old pirate tactic. I'm surprised you don't know about it, Captain." Grievous wished he could still smirk, as the great dreadnought tumbled through space, aflame. Already, the Republic fleet was forming defensive formations around her. The former pirates in Tuuk's fleet had given him the idea; ion cannons and laser drills were a much safer way to disable a ship for a long time without destroying it, when one wanted the ship's cargo. Grievous didn't want *Incomparable,* but putting her out of action with minimum firepower expended had been appealing. Young Komara's duel with the star destroyer at Zeltros had given him the final piece of his plan: the SPHA-T, and its six hundred meters of penetrative power. Pirate know-how and Republic weapons technology proved a formidable tool, when paired with *Cataclysm*'s great speed.

"So, you had that thing built for the sole purpose of blowing out half their engine complex?" asked Hatha.

"Yes," said Grievous.

"You couldn't have aimed it at the bridge or something? Sir?"

The whole bridge crew pretended they were even busier than they were, as their captain questioned Grievous's methods.

"The engine block was the most vulnerable area," said Grievous. "It was a target big enough that we couldn't miss, and vital enough to disrupt them for some time. And it seems some of their fuel tanks went up too..."

Hatha nodded. "I suppose that makes sense. They'll be trying to get a handle on that mess for a while."

Grievous decided it was time to rally his fleet, and harass the Loyalists as best they could.

Moff Denn Wessex had gone from on top of the universe to mortified in less than ten seconds. He stared in disbelief at the disaster that had befallen *Incomparable*.

"That is one cunning droid," Orlok muttered.

"Even when we knew it was a trap, we still fell into it," Salima said, her fists clenched.

"Is the dreadnought lost, Governor Wessex?" Tarkin asked, ignoring his subordinates.

"No, no, my lord..." Wessex said, clearly distracted and distraught. "She'll... uh, she'll survive. The hyperdrive is still up, they just need to stabilize the ship."

"Pull back to Paarin Minor, preserve your remaining fleet at all costs," said Tarkin. "Grievous wins this battle, but it won't be the battle that wins him the war."

"Yes, my lord," said Wessex. His hologram shut off.

"Someone had better start explaining what happened by the time I finish this sentence," Tarkin told the others.

"A bomb, maybe?" suggested Isard.

"A bomb can't go through dreadnought armor like that," said Salima.

"There was a flash in one of the enemy battleship's hangars," Orlok said, replaying camera feeds from *Incomparable.* He paused the video. "Here, look. This object leaves the hangar just as the ion weapon fires."

"It looks like a boarding craft," Salima said.

"Perhaps they built a giant laser drill," Isard said. "They took out the shields above the engine block, then shot this thing through the hole, to create a direct attack on the engines, fuel lines, and reactors."

"Whatever it was, make sure it can't happen again," Tarkin said. With nothing further to say, he left the war room. Losing at Kashyyyk had been part of the plan. Losing at Vinsoth had not. And Tarkin didn't like losing when he wasn't supposed to.

"Taking out *Incomparable* was a high hope from the start, though I was disappointed to see her escape," Grievous's hologram told the highest officers of the fleet. Esera, being head of Naval Intelligence, ranked among them, and was required to attend, no matter how out of place she felt. "They're retreating to their oversector headquarters. The day is ours."

"Yes, but at what cost, General?" asked Rear Admiral Khwaramenes, the extraordinary Givin navigator and mathematician. Esera's eyes flashed down to the after action report. Kronaak's wing of the fleet had taken terrible damage, and the ships that survived the onslaught were under fifty percent combat readiness. Tuuk's center force had taken a severe beating as well. And the Emberleners had lost many of their vanguard and picket ships to the Republic's battlecruisers. Even *Cataclysm* had sustained such damage she'd need weeks in spacedock to be combat-ready again. Grievous had gathered ten thousand ships at Axxila, only six thousand would be proceeding to Agamar. A forty percent rate of loss–both in ships too damaged to fight on and ships destroyed outright–was far too high to be sustainable. Even a young woman with no formal military knowledge like Esera could see that.

"The way to Agamar is wide open. The Confederacy will have a high-speed hyperlane link from Muun space to Minntooine. The majority of our remaining territories would at last be consolidated, something that we failed to achieve even at the height of our power in the second year of the war," Grievous told them all, pacing back and forth with his hands behind his back. "It will now take only thirty-two hours to move a fleet from Mygeeto to Minntooine. Before now, it would have taken nine days."

"This is a force multiplier so great that every loss we suffered today will be vindicated," said Admiral Tuuk. "Time is the greatest currency of all, and now we have it."

The conference then moved off into the esoteric domains of logistics and strategy, things Esera had no understanding of whatsoever. She sent a text-only message to Grievous asking to be dismissed, which he granted with a single glance and nod.

News of the battle at Vinsoth had already hit the galactic news cycle. Despite having been invited to dinner with Ado Eemon, Esera's meager crew were gathered in the mess hall, watching the news on the holotank Voyan had installed for Alize. Murshida and Alize weren't particularly interested in the fighting, they were playing a boardgame with R8, but Voyan and Xiss couldn't look away. When the shadowfeed showed the Republic's dreadnought spinning through space aflame, Esera had the pleasure of hearing the rarest sound on *Encounter*: Lieutenant Voyan's laughter.

"What's so funny?" asked Xiss.

"During all the long centuries of the Republic," said Voyan, "not once has a star dreadnought ever ventured into the Outer Rim, no matter what pirates or gangsters or slavers befell us out here. And now that one has, we've sent it running back to the Core, in flames." He shook his head, even as he smiled. "It's poetic, Xiss. It really is." The Zeltron girl looked thoughtful, and soon was nodding along.

"They sent that lumbering behemoth out here and it got stopped by a rocket with a bunch of lasers strapped to it," Xiss said. "Really makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it really does! Trillions of credits worth of star dreadnought, defeated by some beam lasers on a rocket motor. It's ridiculous enough that this war almost seems winnable now," Voyan said.

As much as *Encounter*'s cynic-in-chief would have liked to live up to his reputation, Voyan should have known better with two fully-fledged Force-sensitives in the room. To them, it was as clear as day what he'd meant to say: this war *did* seem winnable now.

Huh, thought Esera. A few hours ago, Voyan had been saying he was sure the war was doomed. Seeing such a hitherto-unassailable symbol of the Republic's gargantuan might be humiliated like this had changed that. If that was how the average citizens of the Confederacy felt about what they saw today, then Grievous's moral victory might have been even more potent than his military victory. *Does he realize that?*

Esera rolled her eyes even as the question occurred to her. *Of course he doesn't, he's Grievous.*

Author's notes: This chapter is about 1500 words shorter than planned. I cut Obi-wan's second scene on Agamar, I cut an entire Grievous sequence, and I cut some Kronaak stuff, both for time reasons and to eliminate a plot hole I'd inadvertently created. And while I'm at it, I originally planned (while outlining) for a much longer duel between *Incomparable* and *Cataclysm* but the more I thought on it, the more I realized it needed to be fast and dirty for *Cataclysm* to survive, let alone win in a believable way. The SPHA-T's incredible destructive power (seen in the opening of ROTS) and the purple ring of power loss (seen in TCW) are a powerful combo... but not one we're likely to see again, given the kyber crystal situation. Now, onto my thesis on why 94% of Star Wars writers are third-rate hacks and why you too should be an amateur naval historian:

Star Wars writers are horrid at doing even the simplest of research, both for the fictional universe and our real one, and constantly misuse ship classification terms ("battlecruiser" is by far the worst offender). This is because most of them are third-rate hacks only in it for a paycheck. Luckily, we have Kronaak on hand to tell us what a battlecruiser actually is! It's a ship with cruiser speeds and battleship guns, but not battleship armor. Usually (HMS *Hood* comes to mind here, *Bismarck*'s lucky shot was just that, lucky).

But Timewatch, what is a dreadnought? What makes it different than a battleship? You can get the full answer by reading the wikipedia article on the HMS *Dreadnought*. The short answer is that a dreadnought is bigger and faster and better-armed than a classical mixed-gun, triple expansion steam engine-powered battleship.

But Timewatch, they don't have steam engines in space, and these huge ships are slower than smaller ones! Yes, reader, that's true. And now you realize the folly of using real-world boat classifications for space fantasy starships. But this is the universe George Lucas and friends have left to me. I've done all I can to make it sensible. Including reclassifying *Malevolence* et al as (fast) battleships, not heavy cruisers. Apparently there were others but they were all destroyed quickly because these ships suffer from the Worf effect just like the rest of the CIS, so I maintain that it's plausible *Cataclysm* is the only *Subjugator*-class hull left in 19 BBY.

But Timewatch, doesn't *Malevolence*'s purpose as a raider fit the role of a cruiser better, and additionally the ion weapon she is armed with brings a new set of abilities to the table that are as as game-changing as the guided missile, making *Malevolence* a perfectly suitable analogue to the real world missile cruiser, which is far more powerful than any of the old big-gun battleships and dreadnoughts? Shut up, reader, or the next chapter is nothing but Esera brooding for 17,000 words. Don't think I wouldn't do it!

As always, thanks to my beta-reader Corshy for finding all the obvious flaws I missed in the seven hundred times I read this chapter.

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